Life and Times of a New Lecturer

Eileen J. Pollard

‘People will never forget how you made them feel’ (Maya Angelou)

This reflection offers a response to the concrete experience of having my teaching observed as part of a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP). I used David A. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (1975) to launch a small action-based study following this experience. My pilot produced a sample of material about what both students and teachers potentially *think* we are all doing in a higher education lecture theatre. These findings led to my considering what constitutes a lecture, whether or not it is ‘redundant’ in the current online landscape, and, if not, what aspects of the pedagogy of this ancient technique we might wish to emphasise or recapture.

As a new lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, I undertook a PGCAP and this reflection on being observed is thus a Socratic product of an ongoing dialogue with my tutor. I was observed lecturing approximately forty third-year undergraduates on William Morris’ utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, with large-group teaching as the agreed focus. The research design of the resulting pilot study primarily consisted of two open questions – 1. In one sentence, answer the question – What *is* a lecture? 2. What three key words spring to mind when you think of a lecture? I wanted to test the implications of any preliminary findings in new situations, according to Kolb’s model, to help me reflect on how I might continue to develop my large-group teaching methods:

Figure One – Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model

Kolb has described action-based learning as the ‘practical counterpart’ to this experiential model of learning. In this model, a concrete experience is the trigger for first reflection and conceptualisation, before re-engaging with experimentation and experience.

This reflection acknowledges the small size of this initial study. However, it is representative of my own continuous

critical reflection about teaching methods; a process that forms part of every teacher's developing professional understanding.

Although I have been teaching seminar sessions for the last two years, I have only recently started lecturing, or large-group teaching. In fact, my observed session was only the fourth lecture I had delivered as an Associate Lecturer. This inexperience is significant for the work of this reflection because it is linked to my decision to undertake informal research. In my department 'new' Associate Lecturers do not typically deliver lectures (despite their role title) because this type of session is simultaneously seen as more difficult and more important than the seminar.[1] As Gill Nicholls points out: 'Practice, in this case teaching, does not happen in a vacuum, but occurs in a range of social, political and ideological contexts' (2005:612). Culturally, it is an honour and a privilege for an English department Associate Lecturer to be given responsibility for the delivery of a lecture, and a sign of advancement. The ideological contexts of the Associate Lecturer, both narrowly on a departmental level as well as more broadly on a national one, is a HE cultural phenomenon worthy of a study in itself. These factors contribute to the fraught position of the lecture in my department, my faculty and the university environment as a whole. I wished to address the tension between teachers realising that the lecture is seen as an outmoded format that bores students (Clark 2010) and those self-same students maintaining a remarkably rigid stance about what *constitutes* a lecture, and what they have paid to receive. I wanted the study to initiate a probe into the stereotype of the lecture theatre as a 'fish counter'; or rather explore whether or not students entertain *nostalgic* notions of the lecture as central to the university experience while simultaneously disengaging from the form. It was this perhaps anecdotal teacher/student contradiction that inspired my study – 'what *is* a lecture?'

1 I work primarily in the English department at MMU, although I also have a part-time contract at the University of Chester.

As I am new to lecturing, I try different mediums and techniques in order to engage my students and retain their attention, which I have seen wander more easily in lectures than seminars. For example, I use Prezi, rather PowerPoint, as it is simpler to customise Prezi presentations and you can more easily move between the slides and then return to the overview (see figure two). It is important to recognise that students *do* respond to 'the new', and that contemporary culture is predominantly visual, which precludes, in my view, not using any visual material at all. Also, I tend to limit the number of slides to four and talk extensively around the bullet points on each rather than presenting numerous slides all packed with information. One student responded to the second question in my study with the words – 'Informative, Overload, Concentration' (see appendix) – which I think illustrates the problem with presenting too much information, too fast.

Figure Two – Four slide Prezi presentation

This policy of less-is-more similarly informs the structure; consequently, there are four slides, and a corresponding four sections to the lecture, each concluded by a one-minute paper for the students to undertake individually to check that the learning has taken place for that 'block' before moving on. Adopting this structure is in line with research that suggests that on average people can concentrate for fifteen-minute blocks (Postman:1985). For clarity, I time the students with a large, digital stopwatch onscreen for the duration of the one-minute papers. I always design a structured hand-out to accompany my oral delivery, which is similarly split into four and contains details of the one-minute tasks that the students can then answer directly on to their hand-out – see figure three below. I try to use humour to assist my delivery, and often my first one-minute paper is a joke (figure three again). For my *News from Nowhere* lecture, I also wore a t-shirt that read '… but it was all a

dream…', which was an ironic reference to the formulaic ending of the novel and an attempt at 'wearing the session' as clothing.

Figure Three – An example of a one-minute paper

TASK = Was Morris associated with – a) Morris dancing b) Morris Minor motorcars c) The English Arts and Crafts Movement

As my lectures often involve questions and quizzes – as suggested here with the multiple-choice about Morris – I sometimes award prizes for correct answers, generally a chocolate bar, or an 'IOU one prize' post-it note. All these techniques, the integrated interaction through the one-minute papers, the jokes and the use of clothing, are designed to cultivate a feeling that the lecture is 'live', and thereby prompt an edge-of-the-seat engagement. The observation helped me realise that I was pushing and questioning the implied boundaries and hierarchies of the lecture format, in pursuit of what I perceived as creative, inclusive and engaging teaching practice. The reflection process involved my continuing to think about lectures with less rigidity, in the spirit of the flipped classroom (Lage, Platt and Treglia:2000) – perhaps as 'sessions', and therefore as less prescriptive for both me and my students. The flipped classroom frees a teaching space; thus students used to an emphasis on teacher-talk-time are encouraged to refocus on student-talk-time instead.

One of the problems I experienced with the feedback was whether or not to allow the students more control in the lecture, especially in terms of share of voice, which has led me to reflect on my role as a teacher. A difficulty I experienced in the lecture was the low response-rate from the students to the one-minute papers. Although I have found that students are less likely to speak in large numbers in a bigger group, I had had more success with this technique in the previous lecture I had delivered, with the same students, which suggests possible problems with the design of the tasks in the *News from Nowhere* session. Reflecting on this problem in terms of the question of

control then exposed a further tension in my practice. I had appreciated Frank Furedi's critique of learning outcomes in the *THE*, entitled 'The Unhappiness Principle', where he remarked: 'The precision gained through the crystallisation of an academic enterprise into a few words is an illusory one that is likely to distract students from the clarity that comes from serious study and reflection' (29 November 2012) – see also Hussey and Smith (2003 and 2008). However, I now considered my resistance to learning outcomes as actually inhibiting my wish to relinquish control to the students. So, without the clarity of my expectations – or desired outcomes – the students could not fully take responsibility for their own learning.

I considered different strategies for improving the response-rate to my one-minute papers, and indeed, other ways to engage students in large-groups. On reflection, for example, I thought it was right to question how spaced out the students were in the lecture theatre. Now I successfully encourage the students to both sit closer to the front and also next to each other, in order to create a physical and personal environment that more easily fosters exchange. Interestingly, I do not hesitate to move my students around into smaller or larger groups, as required, in seminar sessions; instead my inhibition was culturally and specifically related to lectures.

In an online lecture entitled 'Don't Lecture Me' (2010), Donald Clark makes many points about the problems within and facing higher education, especially the recognition that a good researcher does not necessarily make a good teacher,[2] that delegates reading their papers at conferences is an *extremely* ineffective means of communicating ideas and that real blended learning does not simply mean chopped-up 'blended' delivery. However, his outright rejection of numerous established aspects of higher education pedagogy, such as, for example, having respect for a lecturer, as 'criminal and stupid' demonstrates a discursive poverty beneath which

2 Although this difficulty is discipline specific and Clark's lecture primarily focuses on physics; however, this observation raises the question of how 'discipline specific' – to English Literature – my own work remains.

lurks an inappropriate level of dichotomous thinking (Clark, 2010). The lecture is not 'one thing', it is neither all good nor all bad; yet despite Clark's open hostility to so-called 'faith' schools, he championed the unashamedly evangelical zeal of TED talks as a viable alternative to lectures – and as apparently delivered by people who 'really' know what they are doing. Semantically, and therefore *actually*, there is a big difference between a 'talk' and a 'lecture', both in terms of expectation, learning and delivery. But what lies beneath… is my immediate response to his critique, since a video that is easy to watch is not necessarily an effective learning tool – after all learning is not always easy. Moreover, watching a video is a passive activity, arguably even more passive than attending a lecture; for example, Clark makes a point of highlighting the inclusivity and reach of online videos, quickly establishing a connection between the number of 'hits' and the level of engagement - 'Do the maths', he demands (2010). However, as the contemporary age is one where screens with rolling news and/or daytime television are omnipresent in train stations, doctors' surgeries and staff rooms around the world, so that what is happening *on* the screens becomes both auditory and visual background and wallpaper, is it wise to assume that the one million people who 'hit' your video have actually paid attention to all, or even most, of it? Furthermore, is it then sensible on the basis of this assumption to influence higher education policy and redirect even more content from offline into online? At least in a lecture theatre, the lecturer can gauge the level of the students' attention and, in the words of the novelist Zadie Smith, remind them that 'YOU ARE NOT WATCHING TV' (cited Childs and Green, 2013:48).

The conclusion I have reached through reflecting on 'Don't Lecture Me' – itself a lecture – is that the solution to the lack of engagement in lectures is not to embrace distance and go online, but to emphasise and develop the proximity that lectures facilitate. The Unique Selling Point (USP)[3] of the lecture is that it involves *actual real* people in *actual real* time in an *actual real* space, which, despite the explosion of the

3 Perhaps Clark's ideology does not warrant serious critique, if it were not for the fact his views appear to influence HE policy.

online world, people still definitely want – think of packed arenas for stand-up comedians, filled football stadiums and sold out rock concerts. Many, many people, if not most, enjoy sitting right-next-to other people in a (very) large group in order to take part in a one-off event. You can watch the Cirque du Soleil on youtube, but it will never be the same as the *experience* of seeing it live, and there are ways of cultivating the excitement of the 'live' back into the lecture too.[4]

Building on this notion of 'the live' and utilising the potential of the lecture as an event, comprised of real people in real time and space, means designing collaborative, rather than individual, tasks into the fabric of the lecture in order to boost the response-rate to questions, and therefore engagement. For example, using post-it notes to elicit anonymous responses that students could then swop with one another to feedback. This task offers a pertinent and effective alternative because it encourages less confident students, unlikely to share their own views, to speak in a large group. It is also a practical suggestion even for *very* large-group teaching of two hundred plus students because it is possible to affix a post-it note to each hand-out beforehand and therefore avoid wasting time giving out post-it notes mid-lecture. Furthermore, it is possible to change, or increase, the energy in the lecture theatre – it is after all a *theatre* – and thereby emphasise the 'live' qualities of delivery, through the use of paper aeroplanes, clickers, buzzers and/or airhorns as ways of receiving answers to questions. These techniques would require careful forethought and task design in order to avoid chaos in the session; however, continuing to use a humorous question to *start* the session – such as the one-minute paper detailed – thus, simultaneously gaining an understanding of the students' level of knowledge *and* breaking the ice, is a tactic I still integrate into my practice.

4 I have written on these ideas elsewhere, most notably in the *Times Higher Education,* 'Stage fright can be good for you' <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/why-live-lecturing-benefits-from-fear/2017310.article> and also, as a result, in an editorial for a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Academic Development and Education* (August 2015) published by the University of Keele.

These cultural, historical and experiential factors all led to my study – 'what *is* a lecture?' – the results of which are detailed below. I asked seven students and three teachers two open-ended questions to try and work out what the component parts of a lecture – namely, the students and the teacher – actually think we are *doing* when we are all in a lecture situation. I want to scale-up this research to make it much more representative of teaching in my discipline and also totally anonymise it, as I feel the students in particular would have been less guarded in their responses, if they had not been emailing me directly – as their teacher – with their answers. However, as a pilot study I think it is helpful and I decided to present my findings as Wordles (see appendix). This software makes words bigger or smaller depending on how frequently or infrequently they occur as answers. Consequently, for students the three largest words were 'information-lecture-knowledge' and for teachers 'information-students-thought', which indicates overlap in terms of content but that teachers see lectures as the *start* of a process of thinking, rather than as 'crystallised' knowledge. The word 'lecture' also appeared frequently in the answering sentence, although not always, which perhaps suggests a student need to include it to aid definition.

In terms of testing the implications of these concepts in new situations, I will communicate the findings of this sample to future students when I initially meet them and I am establishing our verbal contract of mutual expectations. Such a conversation might include my expectation that they attend, or inform me of their absence, as well as their expectation that I deliver constructive feedback on their work, which is often the first point raised by students. As I am now entering my third year as a university teacher, I feel I have the confidence, and the required authority, to initiate a student/teacher contract with a new group. In fact, I began to implement this change as part of the summer term teaching I undertook in the English department at the University of Chester. I returned to my reflections on this observation when I was preparing for my first lecture there on 'Approaches to Research', which was my first opportunity to use the post-it note method of gathering

feedback. As Norman Jackson has noted, regarding teacher concepts of creativity, the key is to continue to allow creativity to inform practice through ‘experimenting and taking risks’ (2005:16).

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Appendix

What *is* a lecture?

1. In one sentence, answer the question - What* is *a lecture?

2. What three key words spring to mind when you think of a lecture?

STUDENTS

1. A lecture is a gathering of the speakers research and knowledge on the intended topic of discussion.

2. Critics, specific, crucial.

1. A Lecture is a way of transferring academic information to a student.

2. Condensed, important, information.

1. A lecture is when an academic/specialist discusses a specific subject to an audience in order to pass on their knowledge or understanding.

2. Long, boring, death-by-powerpoint.

1. A lecture is when your lecturer/tutor teaches you new information using visual aids.

2. Note-taking, listening, information.

1. A method of teaching where a teacher/lecturer speaks to a large group of students and educates them on a chosen subject.

2. Informative, Overload, Concentration.

1. A tree trunk.
If the soil is the historical context, the text is the roots, the weather is the modern context, then the lecture is the trunk and the branches are the ideas of the students and perhaps the sun is some vague hope of a platonic form of the good.

2. Ideas, notes, theorists.

1. A Lecture is an opportunity for students to gain specialist knowledge.

2. Engaging, interesting, specific.

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TEACHERS

1. A mode of learning in which a lecturer provides relevant historical, cultural and critical information to a large body of students about a given topic.

2. Stimulating, informative, listening.

1. A lecture is a taught session where information on a given topic is imparted and discussed by students.

2. Informative, educational, professional.

1. A(n English) lecture is the opportunity for an academic to model a way of thinking about a text or series of texts, in a way which allows students and other seminar leaders to draw on particular information or movements of thought, which in turn provoke discussion and more thought.

2. Long-reading-momentum.

Student Wordle: Information-lecture-knowledge

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Biography

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